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ABSTRACT

Concomitant with a child's acquisition of phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules of an adult language is the need to learn pragmatic and contextual abilities for proper use of the language. As early language acquisition is closely allied with play, three children aged about 22 to 40 months were observed during play activities to determine their understanding of language and behavior conventions. Joking, deliberate misleading by an adult, scolding, and humor all elicited certain reactions from the children, showing their degrees of comprehension of a situation and their ability to indulge in linguistic play. (CK)

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LINGUISTICS PLAY AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION*

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Although context has never been excluded from studies of language acquisition, only recently have the crucial situational correlates surrounding any speech event come into the foreground. While it is clear that a child must internalize the phonological, syntactic and semantic rules of the target or adult language, it is equally important that he acquire pragmatic and contextual abilities, if he is to use the language successfully. This does not mean that purely grammatical tactics are invalid, since lexical ability, complexity of syntactic combinations, semantic features, and acquisition of bound morphemes form the bases for grammatical accounts of the various stages of language development. However, attention must also be turned to the less-defined units of language behavior, units which just as authentically characterize a child's speech.

In looking at how children actually behave while internalizing their syntactic and semantic rules, nothing seems to characterize their activity so much as the time they spend in play. While play is an exceedingly complex phenomena, early language acquisition may be closely related to or aided by such physical activities as looking at picture books and talking about the objects in them, working with puzzles, building with blocks and clay, and playing house, not to mention the linguistic instances which will be analyzed below. All these contribute in their own way to the eventual reaching of the target language.

Thus, I will look first at language transactions between the children and the adult, in which certain conventions of language use have been broken intentionally, resulting in what may be called linguistic play. These cases will be broken into their semantic and contextual components, and the analysis will then be taken back to the notion of "stages."

In examples (1) and (2) below, in the first case, the attempt to duplicate what I had noticed the mother doing fails; whereas, in the second case, the children themselves succeed in initiating a similar situation.

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* The examples in this paper were gathered from two French-speaking children, Jean and Sophie. From the age of 24;25 to 26;23 Jean had a mean length of utterance of 1.78 - 2.16. Sophie's MLU ranged from 3.37 to 4.15 at 38;6 - 40;1. Although there was a third child involved in the study, Remi, MLU: 1.27-1.68, Age: 22;27 - 25;20, no examples have been included from him since he did not show an acquisition of the ability in question here.

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CHILD UTTERANCE	CONTEXT AND ADULT UTTERANCE[1]
(1)	S is looking at a picture of a basket with a dog in it. A: C'est une table, ça? (Is this a table?)
S: Maman, c'est une table, ça? (Mommy, is this a table?)	>
	M: Non, regarde bien avec tes yeux, qu'est-ce que c'est? (No, look well with your eyes, what is it?)

In (1), Sophie has been reading a picture book in a question/answer period. Since this was one of the first times that I participated in these events, my question seems to be unexpected. Not being able to judge the situation, Sophie turns to the mother. Previously, she had been naming objects routinely after being asked what they were. Here, however, she sees a basket with a dog in it, and yet is asked if it is a table. She is definitely familiar with both tables and baskets. But, she is unable to respond in the playful tone that the non-serious nature of the question elicits. When faced with my question, which she could recognize as peculiar, Sophie could not decide immediately whether I was duplicating the mother's usual role. In effect, she was following the target language assumption that a strange speaker will avoid misleading their hearer.

Contrasting this situation with the one in (2), we see in this example a successful case of insincerity in which Jean makes up a non-sense term for "duck," and Sophie is able to recognize the opportunity for humor.

(2)	S and J are looking at a picture of a duck in a book. A: C'est quoi ça? (What's this?)
S: C'est comme on l'a vu. (It's like we saw.) J: [ba]...[ba] ça. ([ba] this.)	>
	J points to the duck. A: C'est un canard ça. (It's a duck.)
J: Non ... [ba]	> A: [ba]? Qu'est-ce que c'est que [ba]? ([ba]? What is [ba]?)

[1] The following symbols will be used throughout the examples: S= Sophie, J= Jean, M=Mother, A=Anni, > =position of child's utterance in context.

S: Ça c'est du [ba] (This is [ba].) >

A: Ça c'est du [ba]? C'est un canard ça. (This is [ba]? This is a duck.)

S: Du [ba], c'est du [ba]. >

S and J are giggling.

When Jean first said [ba], he may or may not have intended to play, however, encouraged by Sophie's playfulness and insistence, he joins in the laughter, indicating some understanding of the situation.

In these two contrasting examples, several conventions are at work, conventions that reach directly into issues currently being discussed in the literature on pragmatics. In the first example above, Sophie assumes that I, a not-so-familiar adult speaker, will mean what I say, will not try to confuse her, and will speak at a level that is intelligible to her. In other words, to formulate these conventions more theoretically, there must be an existing "sincerity" condition, a "relevance" condition, and a "good will" condition.

Specifically, adults assume that someone will not begin to speak unless they have a reason to do so, a reason which will become clear when their utterance is understood. A second convention of adult speech is that the speaker ostensibly means what he says; that is, he is sincere, and is most typically not being ironic or sarcastic (which is the case when he does not mean what he says.) An additional convention is that the speaker will not use language that his hearer cannot or is unable to understand. So, a speaker avoids misleading his audience by making sure that his utterance is relevant and appropriate to the situation, is intelligible because it is phrased in language an audience can understand, and is serious if the situation does not indicate otherwise.[2]

This understanding of language conventions seems to stem from a logical inference which in turn depends on the situational context, the propositional content of the utterance, and the social standing of the listener. Inferential opportunities seem to develop best in fully understood circumstances; that is, the situation in which linguistic play

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[2] These three generalizations about language use are formalized in P. Grice's "The logic of conversation" (Berkeley mimeo), 1968. They are incorporated in less philosophical and more linguistic terms in D. Gordon and G. Lakoff, "Conversational postulates," Papers from the Seventh Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society (1971), and in Geis and Zwicky, "On invited inferences," Linguistic Inquiry, 2.4 (1971). With regard to sincerity conditions for language use, see J. Searle, Speech acts (Cambridge, 1969:65).

occurs must be familiar to the child, otherwise, an attempt at playful speech will go unrecognized. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate this point.

In (1), Sophie, quite rightly, does not feel sufficiently intimate with me (a social constraint) to lay aside these language use assumptions. In her bewilderment at the obvious contradiction between what she sees on the page and my question, she resorts to the nearest reliable user of the target language, her mother, for instruction. In effect, she has compared the propositional content of my question with the facts, and the fact that I am as yet a stranger to her, and inferred from the situation that I would not be joking with her, no information to the contrary.

Following the conventions above, below I look in particular at the child's ability to recognize, participate in, and initiate insincere linguistic activity. These include the telling of obvious falsehoods, the assuming of contrary to fact beliefs, the misnaming of objects, and simple uncooperativeness, in order to force an ordinary situation into a humorous one. But as can be seen from example (3), not all cases of non-serious linguistic activity are meant to turn situations into humor.

In (3), Sophie indulges in a falsehood trying to alleviate the consequences of her action.

(3)

~ S has put clay in her mouth and pieces of it have stuck to her teeth. M tells her with a scolding tone that her teeth are blue from the clay.

S: Et Jean. (And Jean.)

>

M: Non, Jean joue avec. Non, c'est blanc. (No, J is playing with it. No, they are white.)

S: Moi mange plus à la bouche. (Me, not eat in the mouth.)

>

M: Mais, j'espère. (I should hope so.)

Since Sophie had already mired her mouth with clay, and the mother's comment was not the first, the situation would have led to punitive consequences for Sophie. Trying to distract her mother, Sophie falsely enlists Jean as an accomplice, knowing fully well that Jean was not likewise guilty.

(3) is Sophie's fabrication, but both children could deny obvious physical facts, by disagreeing with correct statements, and by misnaming objects. Although in (4) Jean playfully insists on his point of view, the mother's persistent questioning forces him to break off his insincere speech and agree with her.

(4)

J is looking through a catalogue, sees an exercise bicycle.

J: Ah bicyclette ... Jean bicyclette Jean, bicyclette.

>

M: Non, c'est pout les mamans, ça. (No, it's for mommie.)

J: Non...non...Jean

M: Pour Jean? (For Jean?)

J: Oui.

M: Tu crois? (You think?)

J: Non, mamie.

>

M: Oui, c'est mieux pour mamie. (Yes, it's better for mommy.)

J: Non...Jean...papa aussi. (No...J...papa also.)

>

M: Papa aussi?

J: Oui.

This, perhaps, is one of the more important examples in which the seriousness convention is involved. Jean begins with a non-serious claim which he discovers he must subsequently modify since the mother's persistence indicates that she wishes him to be serious. It demonstrates the underlying cooperation between parties necessary for play utterances to be made and shows that Jean understands this convention. His subsequent resumption of the "play" claim lends additional support to this contention, since he includes both himself and his father in the second revision of the claim. In this situation his search is for the claim which is most appropriate given his mother's desires and his own wish to be humorous.

Whereas in examples (3) and (4) what was in question was non-serious linguistic behavior, (misnaming, and telling falsehoods), in (5) and (6) Sophie engages in a type of ultra seriousness.

(5)

S and J are playing with toys. M: Vous ne voulez pas de petits peanuts?) (Wouldn't you like some peanuts?)

S: Oui.
J: Oui.
S: Non, des petites cacahouettes. (No, small cacahouettes.)

>

M: Oui, c'est pareil. (Yes, it's the same.)

(6)

S had been playing with building blocks. M: Tu mets tous les petits cubes dans la boîte. (Put all the little blocks in the box.)

S: Ah, c'est des petits carrés. (They are small squares.)

>

M: Des petits cubes, petits carrés, c'est pareil. (Little blocks, little squares, they're the same.)

S: C'est pareil, c'est pas pareil. (They're the same, they're not the same.)

>

S sings as she continues playing with the blocks.

In both instances, Sophie is correcting her mother. She is aware that what the mother is saying is indeed true, but sees an opportunity to correct her. Here, she is learning to reverse the game roles that she has acquired from her mother. This is not to say that the mother has been hyper correct with Sophie; rather, Sophie knows two expressions for the same object and exaggerates the seriousness of the situation.

It is not always the case that a non-serious utterance is recognized by the children. In (7), the playful tone of the adult's utterance does not engage Jean in a non-serious dialogue.

(7)

S has obtained a cooking pot from M.

J: Jean aussi. (J also.)

>

J goes to kitchen. M: Jean aussi?

J: Oui.

>

J is given a cooking pot also.
M: Jean va perdre son pantalon. (J is going to lose his pants.)
J: Oui.
>
J leaves kitchen, M has to follow him to next room to adjust his pants.

Jean is engaged in a serious situation in which he is getting a cooking pot. A lighthearted comment such as Jean va perdre son pantalon does not seem to register, since Jean makes no move to either inspect his pants or stop to get help with them. The mother's playful tone does not seem to be expected in the serious activity of acquiring a cooking pot. Thus, Jean intently continues his game of cooking.

But, in contrast to example (7), (8) is an instance in which Jean initiates an insincere speech event.

(8)

J is looking through a catalogue and sees a television set.

J: Télévision ... Jean aussi. (Television ... J also.)
>
M: Oui, Jean aussi a une télé, où est la télé à toi? Où est la télé de papa maman, Jean? (Yes, J too has a T.V., where is your T.V.? Where is daddy's and mommy's T.V., J?)
J: Pas. (No.)
>
M: Tu ne la vois pas? Regarde bien, regarde bien dans la maison. (You don't see it? Look well around the house.)
J: Ah non.
>
M: Tu ne la vois pas la télé? (You don't see the T.V.?)
J: Non.
>
M: Tu ne la vois plus? (You don't see it anymore?)
J: Là.
>
J points to T.V.

Notice that Jean continues playing until the fourth utterance of the mother, when her tone designates something like "I won't believe what you are saying." Clearly, Jean seems to be aware of the contradiction

that his negation expressed, since he is familiar with the household television set, and at the start of the speech event, he indicated that he too had a television (according to the mother's interpretation of the utterance.) Thus, like Sophie, Jean could, in addition to participating in non-serious dialogues, occasionally initiate such events himself.

Lastly, like Sophie, Jean would agree to a falsehood in order to achieve a certain desired end. (9) is a case in point.

(9)	M, S and A are having tea, J wants to join. M: Pourquoi? Tu es une petite fille? (Why? Are you a little girl?)
J: Oui.	> J prepares to sit at table. M: Tu es une fille? (You're a girl?)
J: Jean fille.	> J receives a cup of tea and helps himself to cookies.

Initially, the mother commented that Sophie would join us for tea, like a big girl; and the tea seemed to be a "girl's" affair. So, when Jean makes a move to join the party, the mother asks if he is a girl for wanting to join us. This last feature of the situation seems to have been understood by Jean also, since he says Jean fille as he joins the party. In this case, Jean is agreeing with what he knows to be an obvious untruth, in order to enter into the activity. Of course, this is not to say that if he had not agreed to being a girl he would not have been allowed to join the party, but only that he was capable of recognizing and going along with the mother's non-serious remark.

Returning now to the notion of "stages," the telegraphic and the more fluent stages both show an understanding of linguistic play. However, as mentioned in footnote (*), the third child involved in this study had not as yet acquired such an understanding. Remi, at the one-word utterance stage, did neither initiate nor participate in such non-serious linguistic behavior. Quite often, Remi did not pay any attention and did not seem to be aware that any language was being addressed to him. In this respect, he had not reached the point of question and answer structured transactions, seemingly the threshold for play behavior for the other two children. It was during just such question/answer sessions with the mother that play behavior seemed to occur most frequently. Remi lacked even the ability to recognize those utterances which were directed to him, and thus was unprepared to engage in the question/response format. Since he did not readily supply the names of objects

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he was very familiar with, any attempt at eliciting a reaction by misnaming an object received no response at all. Consequently, Remi's stage of ability was one in which no conventions as to which utterances were serious had been developed. [3]

Placing my three subjects on a scale along which such a convention is acquired, Remi, at the one-word stage, represents the negative pole. Sophie, on the other hand, and to a lesser extent Jean, could distinguish between serious and non-serious utterances. Thus, in comparison with the one-word utterance stage, Sophie's stage can be characterized as showing a marked understanding of this convention of adult speech.

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[3] Although Remi did neither engage in nor recognize non-serious speech events, it was pointed out during the Forum that other children at this same stage could indeed initiate non-serious utterances.